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ABSTRACT

A state grant to the Department of Romance Languages of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville has allowed development of a proficiency-based curriculum for first- and second-year French and Spanish. Most of the effort to date has been preparation of the syllabus based on specified goals and objectives, or student outcomes, focusing on allowing students enough time to practice functions included in the objectives. Other features incorporated include language functions, contexts, grammar, and lexicon, spiraling of functions and content areas, language skill practice, and a cultural component. Comparison of the new syllabus with a traditional one illustrates the changes involved in redesigning a curriculum to reflect a communicative emphasis. While they treat similar topics and structures, the proficiency-based syllabus places greater emphasis on what the student will be able to do communicatively with the language. Instructional materials have been selected for piloting in this program, and supplementary materials are being gathered. Preparation of teaching assistants includes workshops, observation, provision of lesson plans, and involvement in material selection. Expansion into the semi-intensive language program is anticipated. A number of benefits have already accrued to faculty, department materials and equipment collections, and community. (MSE)

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2 Conversion to a Proficiency Oriented Curriculum at the University Level

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Introduction

For some years now, foreign language teachers have professed a desire to develop in their students the ability to communicate in the second language beyond the confines of the classroom. Conference presentations, articles in professional journals, and in-service workshops have extolled the virtues of one activity type over another, of one testing procedure over another, of one set of materials over another. Yet in spite of all the avowed interest in making substantive changes, few have dared do much more than modify random exercises, add an occasional "communicative activity" (when time permits), and perhaps re-word the current set of Course Objectives so that they incorporate more of the "buzz words" in vogue.

The result of these mostly cosmetic changes has been that when measures of functional ability are applied to students taught within a traditionally-organized curriculum, all parties are embarrassed by the results! Clearly, the modifications need to be made at a much more elemental level—within the curriculum planning process itself. Yet, as someone once observed, it is ". . . easier to move a cemetery than to revise a curriculum."

Several higher education institutions are actively involved in implementing proficiency-oriented instruction in varying degrees. The University of Minnesota, the University of Pennsylvania (Schulz, 1988), and the University of South Carolina (Medley, 1985) are restructuring their curricula in an effort to develop proficiency in the four skills. Other institutions such as Stanford University, the University of Florida, and the University of Illinois are focusing primarily on the oral competencies of the students as a condition for satisfying foreign language requirements (Schulz, 1988). The Department of Romance Languages at Howard University in Washington,

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D.C. has revised its traditional language program in order to provide its students with more functional speaking ability at the elementary and intermediate levels (Camara-Norman, Davis and Wallace, 1987). While institutions such as the University of South Carolina and the University of Tennessee in Knoxville (UTK) began the process of conversion by setting goals and objectives for first and second years, in other programs, such as the one in the Department of French at Northwestern University, departmental goals and objectives were formulated concurrently with the initiation of proficiency-oriented activities (Heilenman, 1987).

This paper describes in some detail the approach which UTK followed in re-orienting its beginning and intermediate French and Spanish courses toward a more functional communicative emphasis. For some time prior to the implementation of the project described, several faculty members had discussed the possibility of incorporating more proficiency-oriented elements into the elementary and intermediate programs. However, lack of adequate information and experience, together with insufficient time, had prevented any concerted action.

Preliminary Activities

In 1986, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) received a special appropriation from the state legislature for the purpose of encouraging efforts to improve undergraduate education throughout the state's public post-secondary system. Academic departments were invited to submit proposals for funds to support projects which would ultimately benefit large numbers of undergraduates. Upon learning of this statewide effort and the funds to support it, the Department of Romance Languages at UTK submitted in July 1986, a proposal to initiate the planning and development of a proficiency-based curriculum for its first and second-year programs in French and Spanish.

The timing of the proposal was fortunate, in that the general atmosphere at the time was favorable for funding such a project. In the first place, the College of Liberal Arts had recently implemented a stronger foreign language graduation requirement. Second, a new set of more stringent admission requirements for all Tennessee public colleges and universities had been approved for implementation in Fall 1989. Among these admission requirements, which apply to all students, regardless of their collegiate academic affiliation, is a requirement for at least two high school credits in a single foreign language. Third, a strong and growing interest nationwide in

proficiency-based foreign language education had caught the attention and attracted the support of many Tennessee foreign language teachers, administrators, educational agencies, and professional groups.

Soon after being advised that the proposal was to be funded, the Department of Romance Languages proceeded to make the necessary arrangements for the participation of local faculty, and for the selection of specialists who could serve as project consultants. The Department provided released time for two faculty members from French, two others from Spanish, and the project director for the winter and spring quarters 1987. These five persons formed the local project team whose assignment was to work closely with the project consultants for the duration of the project, as well as to provide leadership in subsequent development and implementation.

The consultants were selected on the basis of their knowledge and experience in foreign language teaching and were on the UTK campus for a total of 30 days each during the project period. Throughout their consultations, they provided invaluable leadership, expertise and practical assistance to the local faculty team. They made special presentations to the total group in order to establish an understanding of basic principles and characteristics of a proficiency-based program. In addition, they conducted work sessions on the drafting of course goals and objectives, the identification of appropriate teaching/learning activities, the review of sample print and non-print teaching materials, the discussion of selected readings in the professional literature, and the identification of resources related to the aims of the project. On other occasions, they consulted with the members of the local team, both individually and by language groups, in response to special interests and concerns which arose during the course of the project. Finally, they critiqued the work which the local team did between their visits to UTK. In addition to the long-term consultants, the Department was able to bring to campus four other distinguished faculty members whose areas of specialization in culture, textbook adaptation, and language media development were of particular importance to the project.

To support the activities of the project, as well as subsequent work in curriculum and test development, the Department of Romance Languages acquired several items of basic audiovisual (A/V) equipment. With this equipment, the project faculty has been able to preview a wide variety of audio and videotaped materials as well as conduct and tape oral proficiency interviews. It became increasingly evident during the project that this equipment would be equally important for such future activities as training of teaching assistants (TAs), previewing and selecting additional A/V materials, and developing and testing functional ability in the language.

Because genuine proficiency-based programs are still largely in the conceptual stages, it became important for the local faculty to have access to appropriate opportunities for specialized professional development. As part of their work in this project, two local faculty attended workshops and began training that would lead to their certification as oral proficiency interviewers and raters. In addition, one of these persons served as the departmental representative to a national conference in New York, where she attended several proficiency-related meetings and began to identify available print and non-print teaching materials suitable for the orientation of the project.

Details of the Project

Syllabus Design and Preparation

The bulk of the effort to date has been the preparation of the syllabus based on specified goals and objectives. These statements of student outcomes are reflected in the syllabus as well as in the contents of the courses. During this stage, attention has been given primarily to building into the syllabus the time necessary for the students to practice the functions included in the objectives. To be compatible with a proficiency orientation, sufficient time should be allocated not only to formally present new material but also to allow students ample opportunity to use it communicatively in class. More important, the tasks to be carried out determine the lexical, grammatical, and cultural points to be included. In other words, the lexicon, grammar, and culture support the functions which the students are learning to perform. This approach incorporates another principle critical to the syllabus: the recycling or spiraling of functions and content areas. As the College Board's *Academic Preparation in Foreign Language* points out, instead of relegating one function to a single content it is important to combine and recombine functions and contexts at various points and in different ways during instructional time (pp. 41-2). A simple structure such as yes/no questions in Spanish can be taught first to demonstrate the function of asking questions. Later on, further into the textbook, the teacher can reintroduce the same function of asking questions with a different structure (e.g.: interrogatives) used in different contexts (a restaurant, a hotel, etc.) (Medley, 1985, p. 32).

In addition to including functions, contexts, grammar and lexicon in the syllabus, practice in the four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) must be kept in mind as well as the cultural component. This results in

fewer discrete point activities (i.e.: drilling subject pronouns) and more integrated activities that involve more than one skill. One way to integrate several skills into a meaningful context is to think of a main activity with one skill in mind and then expand the activity to develop another skill. For example, from a speaking activity such as a paired interview, the teacher can generate a writing exercise by having the students make a list of similarities or differences between themselves and the person interviewed. Following this activity, several students can be asked to read their lists to the class. As they read, the others will be asked to listen carefully and identify two characteristics that they have in common with the person reading. Finally, various students will be asked to state the two similarities or differences that they share. In this way, one skill serves as a springboard for the development of the other three.

One way to illustrate the major changes involved in redesigning a curriculum so that it reflects a more communicative emphasis is to compare a typical traditional syllabus with one that is proficiency-oriented. In the traditional syllabus the textbook often dominates the content and sequence of the syllabus, which is little more than a list of the textbook's table of contents arranged chronologically. Moreover, since the context, lexicon and structure are in many instances the main areas to be considered there is no mention of the functions. (See Figure 1)

Heilenman and Kaplan (1984) explain that with this type of curriculum it has been assumed that learning a foreign language equals learning that language's structure and vocabulary. Furthermore, they add, curricula of this type have form and not function as their real goal.

Figure 1
"Typical" Syllabus Design

Chapter Title	Function	Context/Content	Vocab/Structures	Culture
At the restaurant	Not specified	food items	nouns, partitives	typical meals
Shopping	Not specified	clothing, colors	noun/adj agreement negative sentences	haute couture
At the hotel	Not specified	hotels	irreg verbs numbers nouns	types of hotels

The proficiency-oriented syllabus, on the other hand, begins with the functions and adds appropriate (and authentic) contexts and the struc-

tural, lexical and/or cultural items needed to carry out the functions. Thus such as syllabus tends to reflect the outcomes of instruction in terms of student performance and independent from the textbook. A proficiency-oriented syllabus might appear as follows:

Figure 2
Proficiency-Oriented Syllabus Design

Chapter Title	Function	Context/Content	Vocab/Structures	Culture
At the table	ask questions	at a restaurant at the table	nouns, partitives question formation expressions	"Three star restaurants" using Michelin guide
Shopping	describe ask/answer questions list negotiate	market, stores	noun/adj agreement expressions interrogatives	bargaining department stores vs. market
At the hotel	give personal information ask/answer questions negotiate	hotels	irreg verbs expressions numbers	types of hotels

Although both syllabi treat similar topics and structures, the proficiency-based one places greater emphasis on what the student *will be able to do communicatively* with the language, rather than upon which structures will be "presented." Subsequent assessments, therefore, will focus more on functional uses of language (e.g. accepting/declining food) and less on knowledge or manipulation of discrete points of grammar (e.g. noun; partitives).

Preparation of the proficiency-based syllabus has been (and continues to be) the most time-consuming aspect of the project. First, broad goals for the instruction were established, and then amplified with more specific statements of objectives. Both the goals and objectives have been expressed in terms of student outcomes, rather than as lists of material "to be presented." For the purposes of the piloting phase of the project the faculty

agreed upon the desired course goals. Appropriate materials have been selected, including the textbook and ancillaries.

Selection of Main Text

An essential resource in the preparation of a syllabus is the textbook. A textbook oriented toward proficiency makes the teacher's job easier with respect to preparation of syllabi, lesson plans, and additional materials. First, the task of the instructor is simplified since a textbook of this nature already contains some of the characteristics of a proficiency-oriented syllabus such as: 1) the sequencing and spiraling of content and functions; 2) the proper order of activities to achieve the objectives; 3) the functions that are concurrent with the objectives stated; and 4) the constant use of authentic language. Second, this type of text will assist in the lesson planning process, because in each chapter the functions are described, a variety of activities is suggested (listening comprehension exercises, drills, communicative activities, etc.) and the four skills and culture are included. Third, a textbook organized aroung function requires less use of additional materials since it is compatible with the objectives stated for the course. In other words, the more the textbook fits these objectives the fewer supplementary materials will be needed to fill the gap between the textbook and the objectives.

Looking ahead to full implementation of the new syllabus, UTK has been invited to pilot a set of materials being developed to enhance communicative functions and to create authentic cultural contexts. The materials are expected to be of great help in Spanish since their contents and goals are congruent with the new course organization, and the grammar is presented to support these functions and not just to be learned for its own sake.

Collection of Supplementary Materials

In spite of the improved quality of some textbooks in circulation or under development, it is anticipated that there will be a need for supplementary materials. These resources are used in four ways: 1) to enrich, illustrate or expand linguistic and cultural topics; 2) to bring current authentic materials to the classroom and therefore provide more real language and genuine situations from the target culture; 3) to avoid total dependency on the textbook; and 4) to provide change of pace and variety of techniques in the classroom. For example, if there is a lexical or cultural unit about sports, it would be appropriate to follow up with video or audiotaped materials such as a television or radio segment taken from the sportscast. By consulting a broadcast schedule several days in advance, the materials can be pre-

recorded and ready for use when needed. When the segment is used in class, the students have the opportunity to hear the language they are learning (i.e., vocabulary, structures) being used in a "live" situation and in an authentic cultural context. Such activities tend to strengthen the attitude that the language they are learning is related to a "real" world and that it is actually used for the purpose of communication!

The collection of permanent materials at UTK has grown to include a number of commercially made videos such as *France from Within*, *The French Way*, *97 Publicités télévisées*, *Papa Poule*, etc. as well as other materials in Spanish recorded for classroom use (see Appendix). As for audiotaped materials, the *Champs Elysées* series and some recordings from Hispanic and French Canadian radio stations in the USA are being added to the collection. Finally, the Department has printed materials that range from journals and newspapers to realia items such as menus, greeting cards, etc. Following the recommendations of the media consultants, a language learning resource center is being considered to enhance the use of A/V materials. Additional acquisitions, lab facilities and personnel will be required to transform the traditional language lab into a multipurpose langauge learning resource center with multi-media capabilities.

Preparation of TAs

As in many language departments, most of the first and second-year classes are taught by graduate teaching assistants. When the proficiency-oriented curriculum is implemented, it will become imperative to prepare them to incorporate a more communicative approach into their teaching styles. Toward this end, short workshops have been offered in order to familiarize teaching assistants with proficiency principles. Furthermore, the required methods course incorporates a much stronger proficiency orientation then in previous years since its professor has become more conversant with proficiency through the Oral Proficiency Testing workshop and active participation is the project mentioned herein. TAs are expected to begin a gradual preparation by observing classes taught by the faculty involved in the project. Similarly, they will be provided with lesson plans which will serve as guides for their teaching and as models for development of additional lesson plans. Under the direction of faculty working with the proficiency-oriented classes, the TAs will help expand the collection of materials including picture files, video and audio recordings of authentic materials, and will create semi-authentic materials. As part of the preparation stage for TAs, they will be familiarized with the Oral Proficiency Interview techniques employed by senior faculty in assessing students' speaking skills.

Expansion of the Pilot Project

As for the faculty members in the department, their integration into the proficiency-oriented program, based on the results of the pilot study, will be voluntary and gradual. Those professors and instructors who are willing to participate in the pilot classes will begin working with the new syllabus in the winter of 1988. At that time, a semi-intensive course in Spanish will be offered in order to accommodate students who prefer to complete their first year of language in one quarter. These students meet for nine class hours a week as follows: two hours a day on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and one and a half hours a day on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They are taught by a team of professors who work very closely with the coordinator of the program.

The incorporation of a proficiency-oriented curriculum into the semi-intensive program offers several advantages. First, students in the intensive program have more weekly exposure to the language than those in regular classes who only have three contact hours a week. Second, since the syllabus is independent from the one in the year-long program, changes can be made in the experimental program without altering the regular first-year classes. Third, the relatively low enrollment, which is purposely maintained, becomes advantageous in that small classes are more suitable for a language program whose goals are functional.

Principal Outcomes of the Project

After one year of the project, the faculty members who have been involved recognize eight major benefits accruing to the Department and the University. The following summary describes these advantages:

1. The local faculty team members have increased their knowledge and understanding of proficiency-based foreign language programs as well as the particular opportunities and problems associated with their development and implementation. Moreover, several professors not involved in the project have already begun using selected proficiency-based materials and activities in their first and/or second year classes.
2. In terms of faculty collaboration in rethinking fundamental assumptions of the lower-level undergraduate

language program, it should be clear by now that the development of substantive goals and objectives based on the proficiency principles requires considerable thought and a disregarding of numerous preconceived notions. Instead of merely tinkering with the syllabus or ordering a new text in response to specific objections or a pervasive sense of lassitude with the status quo, the project faculty were compelled to develop a new curriculum from scratch. One of the major advantages of this process was that it placed a renewed emphasis on undergraduate language programs. Heretofore, the general impression was that the first and second-year French and Spanish sequence was the exclusive domain of graduate teaching assistants and their supervisors. Such an attitude was unfortunate in that it tended to relegate this numerically (in terms of student enrollment) important part of the Department's teaching mission to inferior status, despite the fact that almost all the faculty were teaching at least one or two courses annually at that level.

3. The opportunity to enrich the Department's collection of audio and video-based materials, as well as the necessary equipment for classroom playback, was another important byproduct of the Undergraduate Excellence Project. In acquiring taped material, special emphasis was placed on its "authentic" nature. In purchasing hardware such as VCR's, audio recorders, cameras, sound mixers, and portable PA systems, attention was given to their appropriateness for enhancing the goals and objectives under development for the academic program. As classes are often taught in rather far-flung places on a large campus, there was a special concern about portability and durability of equipment. Although slow at first to respond to the sudden windfall of hardware and software, department faculty are increasingly enthusiastic about incorporating the various non-print media into their classes.
4. Another consequence of the project had important implications for the community. For the first time in some years, graduate-level courses specifically intended for

high school foreign langauge teachers were created. Two courses were offered as two-week long workshops, and all discussion was conducted in the target languages of French and Spanish. The course in French stressed the utility of full-length French films on video for teaching language skills and culture in the secondary school classroom. The Spanish course, taking a slightly different track, focused on using authentic materials, particularly Spanish-langauge satellite and radio broadcasts, at the high school level. Both courses were well-subscribed, and the response was so enthusiastic that there is now a likelihood that they will be offered every summer, perhaps with slight variations in theme.

5. Faculty development was enhanced in two ways. First, the local project team, as well as the faculty at large on one or two occasions, had the opportunity to work closely with highly-qualified consultant fireign language educators. As was noted earlier, this close cooperation infused the faculty with new energy, ideas, and commitment. Other important aspects included grant-supported opportunities to attend and participate at such national meetings as ACTFL, the Northeast Conference, and CALICO. In addition, two members of the UTK team received oral proficiency tester training and will soon be certified to conduct the ACTFL oral interviews in French and Spanish. The Department's rather limited operating budget would never have allowed for such opportunities under normal circumstances.
6. A final benefit relates to the larger dimension of dissemination. Although the project is still in the early stages of sharing its findings with an external audience, it is safe to say that it is making an impact on foreign language teaching in the state of Tennessee. Through the medium of local and state meetings, in-service programs, and new organizations like the Tennessee School-College Collaborative, the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute, and the Tennessee Association of Departments of Foreign Languages, the undergraduate project for proficiency is being studied and evaluated at both the secondary and postsecondary levels. Increased interest in

articulation and outcomes assessment may ultimately lead in the next few years to an endorsement of the goals and objectives defined for the program by the State Department of Education, the University of Tennessee system, and State Board of Regents four-year institutions. A vigorous campaign to disseminate, discuss, and debate the principles adopted will almost certainly benefit the foreign language teaching profession. The next stage of the project is to develop appropriate testing instruments to measure student progress. Gradual implementation of curriculum and testing are therefore watchwords and keys to future success.

7. Provisional curriculum goals, objectives and representative teaching/learning activities have been developed for elementary French and Spanish in the areas of Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing. Similar goals for intermediate French and Spanish are nearly completed. These goals and objectives are subject to change, as experience, increased knowledge, and other pertinent factors may dictate.
8. The goals of this project are in substantial accord with those of the foreign language recommendations of the College Board's Project Equality. This has already stimulated an exchange of ideas between the project team at UTK and private and public school foreign language teachers throughout Tennessee. Furthermore, many area middle and secondary school foreign language teachers have become acquainted with UTK activities through a local foreign language collaborative, the Alliance for Better Language Education (ABLE). Finally, a presentation on the project was recently made at a conference on academic challenges in math, science and foreign languages, sponsored by the Tennessee Department of Education. The result of these and similar activities projected for the future should be a closer working relationship between high school and university foreign language faculty, as well as improved articulation between their respective programs.

Conclusion

It is important to mention briefly what the Department perceives as ideal in order to complete the implementation of this type of curriculum. First of all, budgetary support must be available for continued faculty development, which will include more familiarization workshops that will enable the project faculty to communicate these principles to our colleagues when the time comes for total conversion to a proficiency-oriented curriculum. Second, released time has to be granted to at least one faculty member in each language in order to prepare and collect materials necessary for the effective teaching of authentic language. Third, UTK needs to provide a foreign language media center that is properly equipped and readily accessible to students.

The profession hasn't seen heady times like these since the early sixties. We are living in an age in which the enthusiasm for proficiency in foreign langauge teaching is contagious. Moreover, there is a consensus among most teachers on the need for functional language use. If this common interest is sustained with sufficient moral and financial support, there is a real potential for making significant changes in U.S. foreign language learning.

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